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### **Big Three, U.S. must tackle fuel efficiency**

The keys to driving down gas costs are driving less and driving cleaner, or converting to alternative fuels. Detroit and Congress need to act now.

President Bush has invited the nation's Big Three automakers to the White House this week, and we've no doubt that the discussion will revolve around energy prices and energy security - key reasons the industry simply must achieve a breakthrough on fuel efficiency.

It's fair to say that everyone in the room has been dragging their heels until now.

The gas price sticker shock seen by Americans traveling this weekend could very well prod car buyers into looking for more fuel-efficient vehicles. But in truth, even if gasoline wasn't hovering around \$3 a gallon, there are plenty of reasons for the U.S. to get smart about its fuel use.

There is one sure-fire way to push gas prices down: Stop using so much of it. The key is driving less, driving cleaner or converting to alternative fuels.

In coming decades, new technologies such as hydrogen could be on the market - engineers even have invented solar-powered cars. But in the immediate future, there are several steps industry, Congress and the Bush administration could take to ensure our gasoline supply, reduce crude oil dependence, help the environment and save consumers money.

In fact, engineers say off-the-shelf technologies could boost fuel mileage, even for pickups and SUVs, to 40 miles per gallon. What's lacking is the political will.

Against this backdrop, Bush will meet Friday with GM chairman Richard Wagoner, Ford chairman Bill Ford and Chrysler Group President Tom LaSorda. The trio may press Bush on health care costs and the imbalance between the Yankee dollar and Japanese yen, topics they also discussed with congressional leaders two weeks ago.

But no issue should occupy the talks more than energy efficiency. The Big Three would do well by stockholders and employees if they put their shoulders into getting fuel-efficient vehicles to market quickly.

We were heartened to see GM recently deep-sixed next year's production of the Hummer 1, the \$125,000 behemoth that got 10 miles to the gallon, because it sold just 374 of them last year. Since 1992, GM has sold 12,000 Hummers, including the slightly smaller H2 and H3 models.

By comparison, despite a spring dip in Prius sales, Toyota says in April alone it sold over 8,200 Priuses, 3,800 Highlanders and 2,200 of the Lexus RX400h. In one month, Toyota sold more hybrids than GM sold of its emblematic gas-guzzler in 14 years.

Some car buyers already have figured out how to retrofit their hybrid vehicles so they run solely on electricity and almost never have to kick in their gas engines. Instead of going to the filling station, the owners just plug the cars into wall sockets at night. But the do-it-yourself process can invalidate the car's warranty, so manufacturers are looking at ways to make the cars ready for the conversion before they leave the factory.

Earth to Detroit: Can you read the writing on the wall? We'd like to see the Big Three discuss these items with the president:

Close the gaps. Existing law creates loopholes so big you could drive a Hummer 1 through them. In fact, GM did: The H1 is so heavy it doesn't meet any of the convoluted definitions in existing federal mileage standards. In fact, car makers exploited the loopholes so adroitly that the average mileage today of the automobile fleet is worse than it was in 1987, the year after the tepid federal regulations went into effect. In the future, all vehicles sold in this country should have to meet some fuel economy rules.

Stop trying to sell the sizzle. Administration proposals try to make voters think there's been progress without forcing any real improvements. The administration recently announced new fuel rules for SUVs and pickups, but the plan would require a minuscule improvement in gas mileage. A key effect of the policy would be to halt California's effort to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

A proposal that Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta recently gave Congress would barely nudge passenger car fuel economy above today's levels - yet would fundamentally change the ground rules by giving the president, not Congress, final say over any future fuel use standards. It's a blatant power grab.

We like a bill from U.S. Reps. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., and Edward Markey, D-Mass., to require vehicles to get at least 33 mpg by 2015. Co-sponsors of H.R. 3762 include Colorado Democrats Diana DeGette of Denver and Mark Udall of Eldorado Springs. This proposal is far better than Mineta's bait-and-switch plans.

Get taken to the woodshed. Or the cornfield. Both can make ethanol. Car makers complain that they've made 5 million vehicles capable of using a fuel mix of 85 percent ethanol, yet E85 is sold at only 710 of the nation's 165,000 service stations. They want Congress to direct part of the federal gas tax to reimburse service stations that install E85 pumps.

Ethanol is a promising option, but it's important that the process of making it not use more energy than ethanol provides. New ways of producing ethanol from corn stalks, wood chips and switch grass should have priority.

Nonetheless, Congress should help make it easier for consumers to buy E85.